

A Culture of Make Believe – Civilization and Discontent

Service presented by Carl Tichler, August 16, 2009

Opening Words

There is a language older by far and deeper than words. It is the language of bodies, of body on body, wind on snow, rain on trees, wave on stone. It is the language of dream, gesture, symbol, memory. We have forgotten this language. We do not even remember that it exists.¹

Sermon

I would like to start with a passage from the book “The Year of Magical Thinking”, written by Joan Didion:

It is now, as I begin to write this, the afternoon of October 4, 2004. Nine months and five days ago, at approximately nine o'clock on the evening of December 30, 2003, my husband, John Gregory Dunne, appeared to (or did) experience, at the table where he and I had just sat down to dinner in the living room of our apartment in New York, a sudden massive coronary event that caused his death.²

This sentence is the beginning of a section at the beginning of her book where she describes, with little apparent emotion, the details of her husband's sudden death and the circumstances of her next few days afterward. She gradually intersperses some of her feelings amongst the journalistic description of the events, and about 30 pages later describes her feelings more directly about her first night home after his death:

My insistence on spending that first night alone was more complicated than it seemed, a primitive instinct. Of course I knew John was dead...Yet I was in no way prepared to accept this news as final...I needed to be alone so that he could come back. This was the beginning of my year of magical thinking.³

In writing the book, Joan Didion came to understand her magical thinking --- the unspoken belief that her husband might come back to her --- as a way of delaying or avoiding her grief. She explores the grieving process, and documents her extraordinarily difficult emotional journey. It was not clear to me whether this magical thinking was ultimately a helpful or positive thing for her; whether this belief helped her gradually mourn and come to terms with her loss, or instead was a way of denying her grief and not effectively dealing with it.

What did seem clear to me, though, was that it was a natural and perhaps necessary way for her to cope. The fact that she could document this in such an analytical, journalistic way, actually emphasized the power of the mind to create an alternate reality --- a myth --- rather than deal with a painful reality. The title of this sermon refers to the book “The Culture of Make Believe” by Derrick Jensen, which documents many painful truths about our culture, and identifies the more commonly accepted view of our culture being benevolent and well-intentioned as a myth. In this book and his other works, Jensen goes into great detail to document the legacy of violence in our culture, in particular the massacre of the indigenous peoples of North America, the native Americans. This is one of several examples he presents, but in this particular legacy, glossed over in traditional history, he finds an essential basis of what he terms our “culture of occupation” --- the belief that we are entitled to drive people from their land, kill them mercilessly if they resist, in order to fulfill our manifest (or god-given) destiny. He contends that the racism that enabled and rationalized this violence continues through our history, in the justification of slavery, and in wars of conquest from the Spanish American war up to the present day wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

What makes Jensen's work particularly compelling and challenging for me is the identification of this violence, racism, and what he terms a “culture of death” with industrial civilization itself. The inexorable desire for more resources, he argues, which justified the theft of indigenous people's land and devaluation of their culture and lives, has now led us to the current climate crisis and the widening extinction of more and more species. The belief that we are entitled to consume more and more resources --- that our way current American way of life is “non-negotiable” --- is so ingrained, he argues, that it will not be countered by reason or logic.

This is to me a starting point in how to approach our current perfect storm of environmental, resource, and financial crisis. We first must identify the myth for what it is, and at the same time respect its power to mask certain truths. The

1 **A Language Older Than Words**, Derrick Jensen, p. 2

2 **The Year of Magical Thinking**, Joan Didion, pps. 6-7

3 *Ibid.*, pps. 32-33

government's so-called bailouts and stimulus packages appear to me to be a massive theft from the last remaining source of wealth in our country, the taxpayer. What is being bailed out and stimulated are not the people who have suffered from lost jobs, but the companies and their executives who enabled and perpetuated and profited from the financial bubble in the first place.

The rising stock market and supposedly increasing corporate profits are contradicted by great financial hardship experienced by so many people. Yet, the magical thinking underlying this myth --- that our corporate economy is essentially a positive force --- is still hard to break. I see the growing anger on display at the town halls around the country as not really about health care reform. They are an emotional response to the growing anxiety and fear that our current way of life is changing. To confront the actual cause of this anxiety would require a fundamental questioning of the economic system itself, and also the current life of relative comfort and privilege that is provided by this system --- which, as Jensen and others have pointed out, is not sustainable. In fact, maintaining this wealth and privilege, including our lopsided over consumption of energy, food, and water resources, will exacerbate the crises on all fronts. Even as the futility of this effort has become more apparent, the environmental degradation, the wars over the diminishing resources, and the looting of the taxpayer continue. At the same time, many are beginning to question the myths that have sustained us for so long.

The realization is coming --- that our value, our humanity is not based on accumulation and competition, but in our relation and community with each other and the world. The values that will sustain and heal us are those of the indigenous peoples --- the understanding that we are part of the earth, and that by respecting and sustaining the earth, we respect and sustain ourselves. Our true wealth is in the community that we build with each other.

So may it be.

Closing Words

I came to a new understanding of my place in the world. It had not been the stars that had saved me, but my own mind.⁴